

Hong Kong¹

FRANCIS L. F. LEE

INTRODUCTION

A Special Administrative Region of China, Hong Kong experienced a quick process of democratic regression after the enactment of the National Security Law in June 2020. Its ranking in Reporters Without Border's world press freedom index dropped abruptly from 80 in 2021 to 148 in 2022 (it stands at 140 in 2025). The economy has recovered from COVID and registered an annual growth of about 3% in GDP since 2023, but the outlook is clouded by a wave of emigration driven largely by the political changes, and there are concerns about the city's declining status as an international financial hub.

Historically, Hong Kong journalists adopted the liberal conception of journalistic professionalism as their legitimating creed since the 1980s. They saw themselves as autonomous actors serving the interests of the local public through disseminating timely information and monitoring the powerholders. A significant degree of political parallelism used to be present in the media system. Media organizations ranged from a couple of most explicitly pro-democracy to a few newspapers under the command of the Chinese Communist Party. The spectrum was truncated in recent years, however, with the prosecution and closure of the pro-democracy *Apple Daily* and online news outlet *Stand News*.

The current survey was rolled out in September 2024, weeks after the two former chiefs of *Stand News* were convicted of sedition and about the same time as the Hong Kong Journalist Association publicized systematic harassment of journalists from 13 organizations in summer of the year.

BACKGROUNDS OF JOURNALISTS

The Hong Kong sample has a balanced gender distribution, with 57.4% of the respondents being women. The respondents had an average age of 33.2 years (SD = 9.4), with a Median age being 31 years old. The majority of the respondents were well educated: 71.2% held a Bachelor's degree or its equivalent, while 21.0% had obtained a Master's degree or its equivalent. Furthermore, 76.4% of the respondents reported having received formal education or professional training in journalism. Among those, the most common mode of training was through university or college (88.7%), followed by journalism apprenticeships or cadetships (77.2%) and short-term courses (32.3%).

JOURNALISTS IN THE NEWSROOM

Nearly one-third of the Hong Kong respondents (31.8%) were employed by a native online media outlet, followed by 26.5% working for organizations focused on publishing newspapers and 20.5% for television organizations. Smaller proportions were affiliated with radio (9.5%), news agencies (5.7%), and magazine companies (3.4%). Only a minimal number of respondents (0.4%) reported working in the telecommunications sector, while 2.3% indicated that they did not have a main employer. Regarding area of coverage, 77.3% of the respondents reported working for local or regional outlets, while only 13.3% catered to (trans)national media.

The vast majority of the Hong Kong respondents (90.6%) were employed by privately owned or commercial media organizations. Most of them held non-managerial positions (86.5%), while only a small proportion occupied middle (9.8%) or top (3.6%) management roles. As for employment status, 76.1% of the respondents worked on a full-time permanent basis, whereas others engaged in journalistic work through part-time permanent (2.1%), full-time fixed-term (6.2%), part-time fixed-term (2.1%), or freelance or self-employed arrangements (12.5%). 1.0% selected the option of "other forms of employment." 30.6% reported having additional income sources beyond journalism.

On average, journalists in Hong Kong reported working 45.5 hours per week (SD = 9.8; Median = 48; for those in full-time employment). A majority (62.1%) worked on a variety of beats or subject areas rather than being specialized in a single area. 48.3% of the respondents were members of a journalists' union. Work-related stress was prevalent: 61.1% of journalists reported they felt stressed out at work often or very often, while only 6.8% reported rarely experiencing stress.

¹ Country sample does not fully align with WJS specifications regarding maximum margin of error (see WJS3 Methodology).

SAFETY AND WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

Hong Kong journalists were relatively less concerned about physical safety, as violent attacks and murders of journalists had been extremely rare throughout the city's history. For instance, 97.9% of the respondents reported "never" when it comes to abductions, and 88.6% reported "never" for sexual assault or harassment. Political changes in the most recent years have led to heightened concerns with psychological and digital safety, however. Only 17% of the respondents never experienced demanding or hateful speech; 32.9% experienced surveillance at least sometimes. Although the majority of journalists did not experience many threats regularly, they were aware of the experiences of some of their colleagues, and the respondents were highly concerned that those who harm journalists in Hong Kong would go unpunished.

TABLE 1. EXPERIENCED THREATS

	N	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Demeaning or hateful speech directed at you	289	2.1%	13.5%	36.0%	31.5%	17.0%
Public discrediting of your work	289	3.1%	12.5%	28.0%	33.9%	22.5%
Surveillance	288	3.8%	8.3%	20.8%	28.5%	38.5%
Hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites	289	0.0%	1.4%	11.1%	23.2%	64.4%
Arrests, detentions or imprisonment	289	0.7%	0.7%	0.3%	7.6%	90.7%
Legal actions against you because of your work	289	0.7%	2.1%	8.7%	14.5%	74.0%
Stalking	288	1.0%	1.0%	4.9%	15.6%	77.4%
Other threats or intimidations directed at you	287	0.3%	3.8%	15.0%	20.2%	60.6%
Sexual assault or sexual harassment	289	1.0%	0.7%	2.1%	7.6%	88.6%
Other physical attacks	289	0.0%	0.7%	1.7%	11.8%	85.8%
Coercion	289	0.0%	1.4%	3.5%	13.5%	81.7%
Questioning of your personal morality	289	1.0%	6.2%	23.9%	29.1%	39.8%
Others using your byline for fabricated or manipulated stories	289	0.3%	0.7%	4.5%	8.7%	85.8%
Others disseminating your personal information	289	1.0%	3.5%	14.5%	19.4%	61.6%
Workplace bullying	289	0.3%	2.4%	9.0%	17.6%	70.6%
Abductions	289	0.0%	0.3%	0.7%	1.0%	97.9%
Office raids or seizures or damage to equipment	289	0.3%	1.0%	5.2%	9.7%	83.7%
Intimidation that targets family	289	0.3%	0.3%	2.4%	8.0%	88.9%

Question: "In the last five years, how often have you experienced any of the following actions related to your work as a journalist?"

TABLE 2. WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Worried about losing job in journalism within the next 12 months	284	34.2%	3.01	1.17
Concerned about physical well-being	285	27.0%	2.91	1.02
Concerned about emotional and mental wellbeing	285	61.8%	3.69	1.02
Concerned that those who harm journalists in Hong Kong go unpunished	285	86.3%	4.33	0.83

Question: "Thinking about your work, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

JOURNALISTIC ROLES

The Hong Kong respondents saw themselves as engaged professionals. They placed a relatively stronger emphasis on shining a light on the problems of the society, monitoring and scrutinizing those in power, and speaking on behalf of the marginalized than on being a detached observer. Nonetheless, they did not see themselves as political actors / activists, as they did not emphasize motivating people to participate in politics, influencing public opinion, and setting the political agenda.

TABLE 3. JOURNALISTIC ROLES

	N	Very/extremely important	Mean	SD
Be a detached observer	289	60.6%	3.71	0.83
Monitor and scrutinize those in power	289	78.2%	4.13	0.95
Shine a light on society's problems	289	83.7%	4.30	0.87
Motivate people to participate in politics	289	15.2%	2.50	1.02
Provide analysis of current affairs	289	70.2%	3.91	0.99
Let people express their views	289	78.9%	4.15	0.89
Provide information people need to form political opinion	289	59.2%	3.70	1.09
Advocate for social change	289	45.3%	3.34	1.09
Influence public opinion	289	32.2%	3.10	1.00
Set the political agenda	289	17.0%	2.54	1.04
Promote peace and tolerance	289	47.8%	3.45	1.10
Educate the audience	289	68.9%	3.91	0.98
Point toward possible solutions to society's problems	289	49.1%	3.45	1.07
Speak on behalf of the marginalized	289	77.5%	4.14	0.90
Support national development	288	12.2%	2.10	1.14
Support government policy	289	7.6%	1.79	1.02
Convey a positive image of political leaders	289	6.2%	1.51	0.91
Provide entertainment and relaxation	289	12.1%	2.38	1.00
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	289	27.3%	2.90	1.04
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	289	29.4%	2.91	1.04
Tell stories that emotionally move the audience	289	36.3%	3.19	1.03
Support efforts to protect public health	289	39.1%	3.24	1.07
Counteract disinformation	289	73.7%	4.05	1.03
Discuss future implications of current events	288	64.6%	3.79	0.99

Question: "Please tell me how important it is to do each of the following in your daily work." (Scale: 5 = Extremely important; 4 = Very important; 3 = Moderately important; 2 = Slightly important; 1 = Not at all important.)

JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

The Hong Kong respondents had somewhat “contradictory” views on journalistic epistemologies. An absolute majority of 93.4% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that “interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts,” yet 96.3% agreed or strongly agreed that “journalists should let the facts speak for themselves.” 76.4% agreed or strongly agreed that “it is possible to represent objective reality in reporting,” though 63.1% also agreed that “truth is inevitably shaped by those in power.”

TABLE 4. JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts	271	93.4%	4.38	0.67
Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power	271	63.1%	3.66	0.93
It is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting	271	60.5%	3.56	0.98
Things are either true or false, there is no in-between	271	16.2%	2.53	0.91
It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting	271	76.4%	3.82	0.72
Journalists should trust their instincts in deciding what's true and what's not	271	18.8%	2.67	0.97
Journalists should intuitively know what the final story will be	271	34.7%	2.92	1.02
Journalists should let the facts speak for themselves	271	96.3%	4.40	0.59
Journalists should be part of a community to portray it accurately	271	42.1%	3.30	1.00
Journalists should make their standpoint transparent in their work	271	22.9%	2.63	1.06
Journalists should alert audiences when a source's claim is untruthful	271	91.1%	4.21	0.67

Questions: “The following statements deal with beliefs related to how journalists know what they know. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree.” / “Using the same scale, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following beliefs.” (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

JOURNALISTIC ETHICS

Put in general terms, 87.5% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that “what is ethical journalists should always be determined by professional standards regardless of situation and personal judgment,” whereas only 51.9% agreed that “what is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation.” However, what specific reporting methods are concerned, more than 80% of the respondents saw claiming to be somebody else, using hidden recording devices, using confidential business or government documents without authorization, and using the personal materials of powerful people as “justified on occasion.”

TABLE 5. ETHICAL ORIENTATIONS

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
What is ethical for journalists should always be determined by professional standards regardless of situation and personal judgment	288	87.5%	4.23	0.79
What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them	289	50.5%	3.33	0.97
What is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation	289	51.9%	3.31	1.04
What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgment	289	36.0%	2.95	1.08

Question: “The following statements describe different responses journalists may have to ethical problems. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree.” (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

TABLE 6. JUSTIFICATION OF CONTROVERSIAL REPORTING METHODS

	N	Always justified	Justified on occasion
Claiming to be somebody else	289	2.1%	80.6%
Using hidden recording devices	289	2.1%	94.5%
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	288	4.5%	88.2%
Using the personal materials of powerful people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	288	4.9%	87.2%
Using the personal materials of ordinary people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	287	1.0%	63.1%
Paying people for confidential information	289	2.8%	37.7%
Accepting money from sources	289	0.3%	5.2%
Accepting a free product or service from sources	289	0.7%	28.7%
Producing content that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature	289	0.3%	15.2%
Publishing or broadcasting stories with information that is not yet verified	289	0.0%	17.0%

Question: “Which of the following, if any, do you think may be always justified, or justified on occasion, and which would you not approve of under any circumstances?”

EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

Given the rapid democratic regression in the most recent years, not surprisingly only 1.5% of the respondents indicated that there is a great deal or complete media freedom in Hong Kong. Nonetheless, 28.7% of the respondents still believed that there is a great deal or complete freedom in selecting news stories, and 33.7% believed that there is a great deal or complete freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized.

TABLE 7. PERCEPTIONS OF EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

	N	A great deal/ complete freedom	Mean	SD
Freedom in selecting the news stories	279	28.7%	3.16	0.75
Freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized	279	33.7%	3.24	0.73
Media freedom in Hong Kong	275	1.5%	2.46	0.67

(Scale: 5 = Complete freedom; 4 = A great deal of freedom; 3 = Some freedom; 2 = Little freedom; 1 = No freedom at all.)

EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

The majority of the respondents saw editorial supervisors or higher editors as very or extremely influential on news decisions. Notably, 70.6% of the respondents also saw the business managers of the news organization as influential, though only 16.9% saw advertising considerations and 23.3% saw profit expectations as influential. 61.8% and 47.7% of the respondents saw government censorship and government officials, respectively, as influential.

TABLE 8. EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

	N	Very/extremely influential	Mean	SD
Peers on the news staff	269	36.4%	3.18	0.94
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	270	75.9%	3.99	0.97
The business managers of the news organization	255	70.6%	3.87	0.97
The owners of the news organization	238	53.4%	3.42	1.25
Editorial policy	268	68.3%	3.87	0.95
Advertising considerations	219	16.9%	2.47	1.15
Profit expectations	227	23.3%	2.67	1.21
Audience research and data	230	15.2%	2.47	1.07
Availability of news-gathering resources	266	55.6%	3.55	1.01
Time limits	270	50.0%	3.55	0.98
Journalism ethics	266	42.9%	3.30	1.05
Self-censorship	269	50.2%	3.48	1.07
Personal values and beliefs	267	42.3%	3.19	1.12
Colleagues in other media	270	23.7%	2.89	1.02
Friends, acquaintances and family	260	11.2%	2.38	1.08
Feedback from the audience	269	19.3%	2.78	0.96
Competing news organizations	261	21.1%	2.72	1.03
Media laws and regulation	268	41.8%	3.34	1.13
Access to information	270	51.1%	3.54	0.99
Government censorship	262	61.8%	3.73	1.11
Government officials	258	47.7%	3.36	1.21
Politicians	253	29.6%	2.82	1.16
Business people	248	18.1%	2.50	1.11
Public relations	250	18.8%	2.60	1.08
Relationships with news sources	262	37.4%	3.20	1.05
Police	241	44.0%	3.23	1.36
Issue advocacy groups	243	24.3%	2.69	1.17
Scientists or health experts	225	10.2%	2.23	1.03
Religious groups and institutions	218	2.8%	1.82	0.79
Military	154	13.0%	1.92	1.25
Para-military groups, militias and similar groups	148	10.8%	1.74	1.14
Organized crime and criminal groups	154	8.4%	1.75	1.01
Terrorist groups	141	9.2%	1.66	1.05

Question: "Here is a list of potential sources of influence. Please tell me how much influence each of the following has on your work as a journalist." (Scale: 5 = Extremely influential; 4 = Very influential; 3 = Moderately influential; 2 = Slightly influential; 1 = Not at all influential.)